



Disciplers Bible Studies

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Invitation to Study

The name of God is never mentioned in the book of Esther, but the hand of God is clearly evident on every page. God, who created the world and everything in it, is actively involved in history. Indeed, history is "His story." God made everything and everything is dependent upon Him (Psalm 104:24-30). He causes the nations to rise and fall (Job 12:23). He made the heaven and the earth, and He is the one who will protect and keep His own forever (Psalm 121).

In the fifth century before Christ, the Jewish people were scattered throughout the Persian Empire. After being taken into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, only a small percentage had returned to their homeland of Judea. Lest they should forget that God was still actively involved in their everyday lives and still at work in fulfilling His promise of the Messiah, the Holy Spirit moved in a heart to record the story of Esther. It would be a beautiful reminder of God's providence and of His protection of His people.

Lest we should forget that God works behind the scenes in all world and personal history, the Book of Esther has been included in God's most holy Word, the Bible. We all need such a reminder and encouragement in our lives from time to time. God has not forgotten us. God is not dead. God is alive and active in the world. He cares for His own. He cares for you! *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose* (Romans 8:28).

The Book of Esther was written as an encouragement to the Jews and is an explanation of one of their favorite yearly feasts. The Book of Esther will also be an encouragement to you. It will explain many things about the miraculous, providential workings of God. Will you commit to join in this six week study of the Book of Esther? As you do, will you open your heart and mind to the teaching and will of God? Will you expect a blessing as you do so?

I. Introductory Historical Background

The nation of Israel had reached the height of its power and prestige under King Solomon. However, even before Solomon's death, an undercurrent of unrest and resentment was rising within the northern part of the kingdom. When Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam, refused to acknowledge their complaints, the result was a split between the northern and southern sections of the kingdom. The northern

kingdom declared its independence and took the name of Israel. The smaller southern kingdom, which included the city of Jerusalem, came to be called Judah. From this point on, both kingdoms began to stray from the Lord and ultimately rebelled against Him. Through His prophets, God warned His people of impending judgment if they did not return to Him, but they continued in rebellion. Consequently, in 722 B.C. the northern kingdom was conquered by King Shalmaneser V of Assyria. Isaiah chapter one describes the wickedness of the southern kingdom of Judah and God's indictment against them. They too would soon be conquered by a foreign enemy and the majority of the people taken into captivity in a faraway land.

A. Babylonian Captivity

In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and all his army came against Jerusalem and besieged it.....the city was penetrated.....the king of Babylon killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes.....he also killed all the nobles of Judah. Moreover, he put out Zedekiah's eyes, and bound him with bronze fetters to carry him off to Babylon.....the Chaldeans (Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers) burned the king's house and the houses of the people with fire, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem.....the captain of the guard carried away captive to Babylon the remnant of the people (Jeremiah 39:1-10). Thus Jeremiah describes the destruction of Jerusalem and the taking of the Jewish people into captivity in Babylon in 586 B.C. This was the third and final deportation under Nebuchadnezzar. The first had been in 605 B. C. under Jehoiakim and the second in 597 B. C. under his son, Jehoiakin.

B. Persian conquest

During the period of the Jew's captivity, in 539 B.C., the Babylonian Empire was conquered by Cyrus the Great of Persia. Isaiah had prophesied the fall of Babylon in Isaiah 13-14 and had sung of Cyrus as God's instrument for the sake of His people in Isaiah 45:1-4:

*Thus says the Lord to His anointed,
To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held---
To subdue nations before him
And loose the armor of kings,
To open before him the double doors,
So that the gates will not be shut:
I will go before you
And make the crooked places straight;
I will break in pieces the gates of bronze
And cut the bars of iron.*

*I will give you the treasures of darkness
And hidden riches of secret places,
That you may know that I, the Lord,
Who call you by your name,
Am the God of Israel.
For Jacob My servant's sake,
And Israel My elect.*

C. Cyrus' decree for Jews to return to Jerusalem

God's providence in raising up Cyrus and giving him dominion over the land where the Jews were in captivity is clearly seen in II Chronicles 36:22-23. *Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10) might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 'Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: 'All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all His people? May the Lord His God be with him and let him go up.'*

Under Cyrus' edict, every Jew in Babylon had the opportunity to return to his homeland. Also, the temple in Jerusalem was to be rebuilt at the expense of the Persian royal treasury. The account of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem to begin restoration of the temple is recorded in the first six chapters of the book of Ezra. The "Cylinder of Cyrus" which was discovered in the 19th century, backs up the Biblical account, showing that Cyrus reversed the Babylonian policy of deporting entire populations of conquered nations. In the Cylinder, Cyrus boasts of returning the inhabitants of lands from Ashur and Shushan, Agade, Ashnunak, Zamban, Meturnu, Deri, Gutium, and other cities on the far side of the Tigris River to their rightful dwelling places. According to Ezra 2:64-65, nearly fifty thousand Jews returned to Jerusalem under Cyrus' edict.

D. Jews who remained

The Book of Esther was written about the many Jews who did not return to their homeland. Although some must have had legitimate reasons for staying, the vast majority were simply disobedient to God. They chose to stay and enjoy the pleasures and plenty of Persia rather than return to the desolation and hard work which awaited them in Judea. As far as you know and as much as you are able, are you living in the center of God's will? What personal pleasures or comforts are you willing to give up to follow God and live in perfect obedience to Him?

Among the Jews who stayed were the families of Esther and her cousin Mordecai, two of the main historical

characters in the Book of Esther. Through their story, it is clear that God continued to care for His wayward people who remained in voluntary exile. Although they were not in the center of His will in the land which He had given them, still God was faithful to them. *Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments (Deuteronomy 7:9).*

II. Historical Setting of Esther

A. The Time

The Book of Esther takes place over a ten-year time span, from 483 to 473 B.C. In 530 B.C., Cyrus the Great was killed in battle as he continued his conquests for the Persian Empire. His son Cambyses attempted to follow in his footsteps but was not as successful as his father had been. He committed suicide in 521 B.C. when a man pretending to be his deceased younger brother attempted to usurp the throne. The pretender was dethroned a few months later by Darius, the son of Hystaspes, who was the rightful heir to the throne, being descended from the same Persian royal line as Cyrus. Darius reigned until his death in 486 B.C. He was succeeded by his son Xerxes, the King Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther. The first chapter of Esther takes place in the third year of the reign of Ahasuerus (483 B.C.). The second chapter probably takes place in 478 B.C. after his return from an unsuccessful military campaign against Greece. The remainder of the events in the book occur during the twelfth year of his reign (Esther 3:7).

B. The King

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name and Xerxes is the Greek name for Khshayarsh, King of Persia, who ruled from 486 to 464 B.C. The historian, Herodotus, writes of Xerxes holding a great banquet in the third year of his reign (Esther 1:3-4), and inviting the officials and princes of his kingdom to help plan his military campaign against Greece. Perhaps there was more partying than planning, because in 480 B.C. Xerxes was defeated by the Greeks at Salamis. He then returned home to seek solace in his harem, as described in Esther chapter two. This, too, is corroborated by Herodotus.

C. Jewish life in Persia

The events recorded in the Book of Esther took place thirty-two years after the Jews had completed the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. It had been approximately sixty years since Cyrus' edict permitting the Jews to return home. Over one hundred years had passed since Nebuchadnezzar had taken the Jews captive into Babylon. The generation of Jews who

remained in Persia had never seen their homeland. However, they had retained their nationalistic loyalty through commitment to their spiritual heritage, largely due to the prophecies of Ezekiel. The Jews definitely retained a separate identity from the Persian people in whose land they had been forced to live. They had no political identity, but they did have their religion. There was no temple and no sacrificial worship, but prayer meetings were held and the temple worship was continued on a spiritual level. Realizing the importance of their religious writings, scribes worked to collect and compile historical and prophetic books which have become portions of the Bible. Some of the Psalms were composed during this period, including Psalm 137.

*By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, yea, we wept
When we remembered Zion.
We hung our harps
Upon the willows in the midst of it.
For there those who carried us away captive
required of us a song,
And those who plundered us required of us
mirth,
Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

*How shall we sing the Lord's song
In a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget her skill!
If I do not remember you,
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—
If I do not exalt Jerusalem
Above my chief joy.
Remember, O Lord, against the sons of Edom
The day of Jerusalem,
Who said, "Raze it, raze it,
To its very foundation!"
O daughter of Babylon, who are to be
destroyed,
Happy shall he be who repays you as you
have served us!
Happy shall he be who takes and dashes
Your little ones against the rock.*

The day did come when Babylon was destroyed and repaid for what they had done to the Jews. Persia overthrew the Babylonian empire (as described in I, B) and brought tolerance for the Jewish religion and customs. Cyrus the Great and Darius Hystaspes both respected the religion of the Jews and encouraged them to return to their homeland and to rebuild their temple. Those Jews who remained in the land of their captivity were free to practice their own religion. While in captivity, the Jews continued to observe the Sabbath day. They commemorated the ancient exodus from slavery in Egypt in the ritual of the Passover. They kept the oral tradition alive by passing down the stories of

past triumphs and tribulations, as God had commanded. Daily life for the Jews in the eastern Persian empire was probably not much different from that of those who had returned to their homeland.

III. Author and Date

Esther is one of a group of writings known as the Five Rolls. The other four rolls are Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes. "The Book of Esther has always been very important to the Jews. In fact, it was traditional for every Jewish family to have a copy of the scroll of Esther and read it aloud every year at the Feast of Purim. It was held in high esteem and called 'the Roll'. Some Jews believed that in the days of the Messiah, the only Scriptures left would be the Law and the Roll" (J.R. Dummelow, The One Volume Bible Commentary). Esther is still read aloud every year at Purim in Jewish synagogues. As the rabbi reads, the children respond with shouting and booing at the name of Haman, the villain, and cheering at the names of Esther and Mordecai, the heroes.

The author of the Book of Esther does not identify himself (or herself) and so is unknown. However there are several things we can surmise about the author through the contents of the book. Whoever wrote Esther was quite familiar with Persian etiquette, customs, geography, history, and words. In all probability then, the author lived in Persia during this particular period of time. The knowledge of Jewish customs and the prominent Jewish nationalism in the writing would suggest that the author was also Jewish. It has been suggested that Mordecai wrote the book. Other possibilities are Ezra, Nehemiah, or even Esther herself.

From Esther 1:1 and 10:1-3, it is clear that the book was written after the death of King Ahasuerus, as the language there implies that his reign was past. Therefore, the book must have been written between 464 B.C., the year of Ahasuerus' death, and 435 B.C., the year in which the palace at Shushan was destroyed by fire. The fire is not mentioned in the book, and surely would have been if it had taken place before the writing.

IV. Purpose of the Book of Esther

As previously stated, the name of God is not found at all in the Book of Esther, nor is any reference made to Him, either obvious or veiled. However, no Christian believer, having read and studied the book could deny that God's voice speaks out on every page. God is definitely evident in this beautiful book. His providence and His protection of His people is confirmed and explained through the events recorded here. Esther also gives us the reason for the institution of one of Israel's favorite feasts, Purim.

A. God's providence

The most obvious purpose of this book is to demonstrate God's providential care for His people. The word providence does not occur in the Bible but is definitely a biblical doctrine. The Bible clearly teaches that things do not happen by chance or fate but by the determination of God. "The Westminster Confession of Faith," published in 1647 and probably the most influential Protestant statement of faith, states: "God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."

Providence comes from the Latin "provideo" which means "to see a thing beforehand" or "to have foresight or foreknowledge." The only One who has "provideo" is God. Thus, the only One who is capable of acting upon "provideo" is God. Therefore, providence refers to God's foreknowledge and His action which flows from that foreknowledge. Providence implies that God has absolute power over all that He has created (see Daniel 4:35; Psalm 135:6; Ephesians 1:11). In Explore the Book, J. Sidlow Baxter explains God's providence as the central spiritual message of the Book of Esther in a beautiful way: "Amid the shadows God stands, keeping watch upon His own. He sees and knows and cares for His own. He may be out of their sight; but they are never out of His sight. *He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.*"

God's providence is clearly seen time and again throughout the Book of Esther. By the time one finishes reading the story, it is impossible to doubt that God was definitely at work in the life of each person, the ordinary and the outstanding alike, and also in the outworking of the circumstances. *There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the Lord's counsel—that will stand* (Proverbs 19:21).

Are you an ordinary person? Do you wonder why God would even have an interest in working out His will and plan through someone like you? Have you failed to see His hand of discipline and love in your life, molding you and conforming you into all He wants you to be? As you read the Book of Esther will you open your eyes and open your heart to see the places where God is actively at work behind the scenes in the seemingly ordinary, everyday occurrences of your life? *For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure* (Philippians 2:13).

B. God's protection

God protects His people. The Psalms tell us that God protects the weak and needy (Psalm 12:5, NIV), He protects His people from trouble (Psalm 32:7, NIV), He protects those who acknowledge His name (Psalm 91:14, NIV), and Psalm 61 is entitled **Assurance of God's Eternal Protection**. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of God protecting the widows and orphans. In John 17 (NIV), Jesus prayed that God would protect His followers from the world and from the evil one, and the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:3 (NASB) says that God will protect us from the evil one.

In the Book of Esther, God's providential protection of His people is evident. We see how God overrules the power and intentions of the evil one in order to protect those who are His. The Jews who lived in Persia at the time of Esther were not living in God's perfect will because they had not returned to their homeland of Judah when they had the opportunity. But God was still watching over them. He was still working in their lives. He still had His hand of protection upon them. God was faithful, and He answered them when they cried out to Him. God never fails to protect His own.

C. Feast of Purim

The Book of Esther tells the story behind the institution of the Feast of Purim. This has traditionally been one of the favorite feasts of the Jews and continues to be celebrated today, just as explained in Esther. The celebration of the feast has also made the Book of Esther one of the favorites for all Jews. It is read yearly in the synagogue and in every orthodox Jewish home on the 14th of Adar which occurs during our month of March.

Application

May God bless you as you read and study this exciting book. May God's Holy Spirit apply the truths of Esther in such a way that you become acutely aware of His powerful workings not only in the universe and in the world around you but in your own life as well. God is alive and well. God cares. God cares for you! Will you commit your way to Him and honor that commitment with daily Bible study and prayer so that He may speak to you through His Word and guide you by His Holy Spirit?